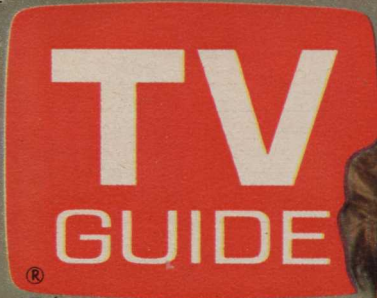


Local Programs Oct. 23-29

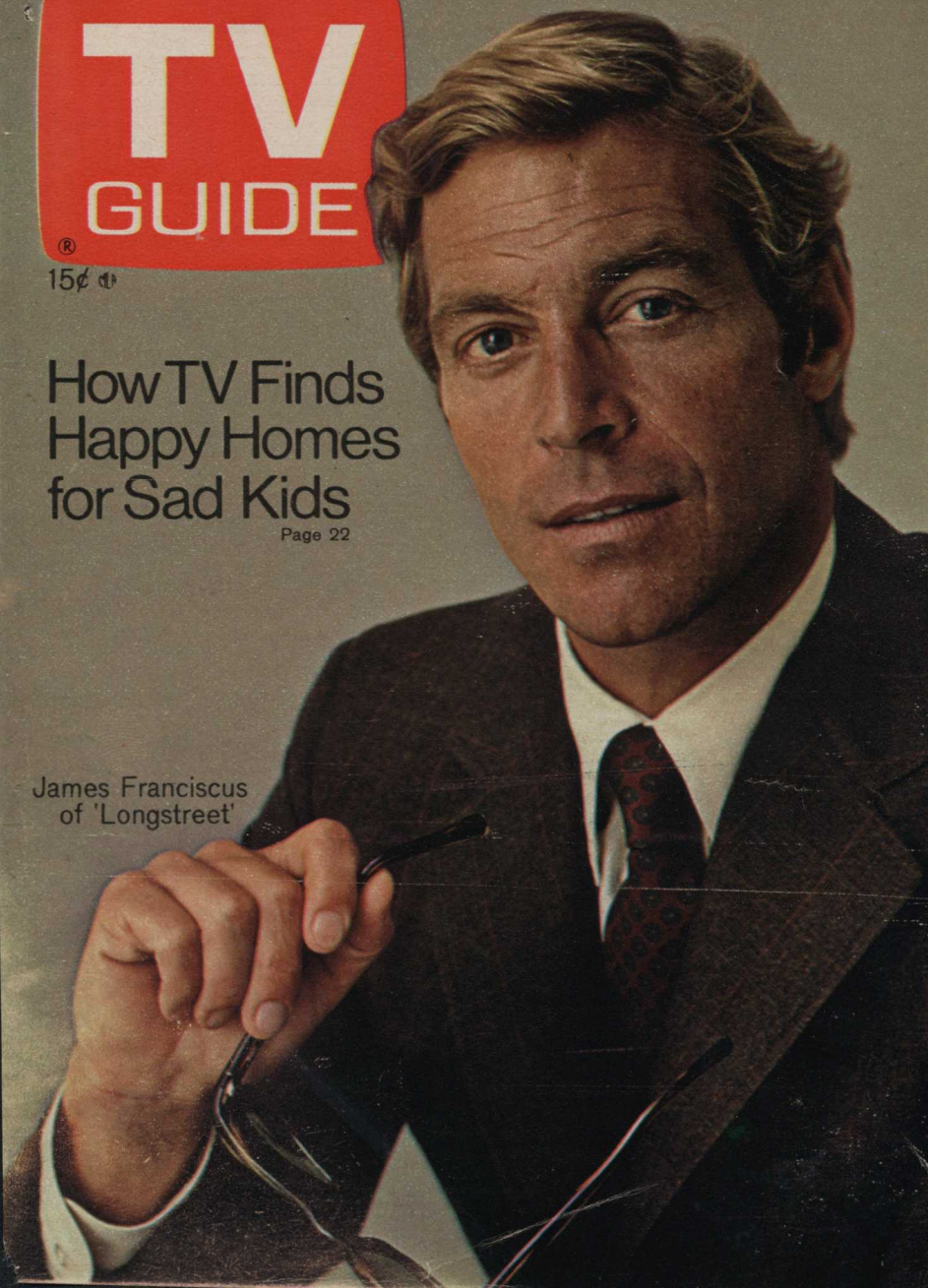


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James Franciscus
of 'Longstreet'



BRINGING 'MR. NOVAK' UP TO DATE

By Leslie Raddatz



James Franciscus

The name James Grover Franciscus absolutely rings with solidity, integrity, conservatism and dignity. And well it should, for its bearer—star of the new ABC series *Longstreet*—is an actor possessed of all these sterling qualities, both on and off the screen. But Jim Franciscus has a childhood nickname, "Goey" (his brother could not pronounce Grover). Rarely used any more, it fits the obverse side of Jim's personality. He is truly a goer, with a "devilish" streak that surfaces when he gets home of an evening or weekend, or sometimes "after a few grapes."

To the viewing public, he is best known as the upstanding Mr. Novak of a few seasons back. To his peers, he is

"a professional right down the line," "a fine young actor," "an instinctive actor," "dedicated," "basically intellectual in an area that is not intellectual." On the personal side, his credentials are impeccable: top-drawer social and cultural background, educated at Eastern prep schools and Yale, an unsullied domestic life with his one and only wife and their two daughters, middle-of-the-road politically, his infrequent public appearances limited almost exclusively to celebrity tennis tournaments, which he usually wins.

But then there is the other Franciscus. Those close to him say: "He's normal as blueberry pie, but crazy as a June bug when he gets home";

"When he's away from acting he's a very funny guy"; "He can be two absolutely different people"; "He's a complete wild man when he gets rolling"; "He's a different guy at parties, after a few martinis"; "He can be loud and raucous."

It is difficult to imagine Franciscus/Novak chasing his wife down the hall of a hotel in Rome throwing spaghetti at her, but "Goey" Franciscus did exactly that—all in fun, of course, but to the consternation of onlooking maids. "I don't know how it started," says the ebullient Kitty Franciscus, "but we were having this great spaghetti fight in the room. Finally I ran out into the hall, and Jimmy came after me, still throwing spaghetti. We really had a mess to clean up afterward." Franciscus's longtime friend Wendell Niles Jr. has known him since his "swinging bachelor days" in New York, when he was dating Jane Fonda. Niles says, "I could tell you stories about him you couldn't print. They're as wild as the things you hear about John Barrymore and Errol Flynn."

Few except family and close friends see this frivolous side of Franciscus. With the press, he is reserved to a fault, and he has been the recipient of the Hollywood Women's Press Club "Sour Apple Award" for uncooperative stars. ("He should always take me along on interviews," says his wife. "I'd change his image.") But Franciscus the workmanlike actor is on view to everyone on a set with him. *Longstreet* is an example.

After two seasons of *Mr. Novak*, anxious to get away from the "shirt and tie" image, Franciscus decided to concentrate on feature motion pictures. He made six in the past three years, but except for "Marooned" and "Beneath the Planet of the Apes," the experience was not rewarding. (His most recent effort, "Cat-o' Nine-Tails," made in Italy, scene of the spaghetti battle,

was called "unfit for human consumption" by critic Judith Crist.) Franciscus says, "I don't like the type of pictures being made now, and I don't like traveling. I've been living like a gypsy, making movies in Italy, Norway and Spain. I missed my family." Since he did not have the choice of roles that, for instance, Steve McQueen has ("I'm obviously not in that class"), he decided to give television another try.

Longstreet was presented to him, and he liked it. "There was a challenge in playing a hero who's blind," he says. "Has it ever been done before?" *Longstreet* also meant a reunion with Stirling Silliphant, the talented writer-producer with whom he worked during the first season of *Naked City*, his first starring role on TV.

Although Franciscus was anxious to get back into television and wanted to do *Longstreet*, there was the matter of making a deal. And here Franciscus the businessman comes into focus. Dick Clayton, the actor's agent, says, "He wanted to do the show from the very start, but they had to take him on his own terms. There's no back-and-forth with him. Once he says something, he doesn't budge." Franciscus ended up owning a piece of *Longstreet*.

With the contracts signed, the actor set about learning how to play a blind man. His father-in-law, the veteran director William Wellman, said he could do it only with dark glasses, but Franciscus did not agree. Eventually in the show he would sometimes wear glasses, sometimes use a radar-equipped cane, sometimes depend upon his dog. But first he went to the Foundation for the Junior Blind in Los Angeles and to the Guide Dog Foundation in San Raphael, Cal. He attended classes and followed blind persons about the streets as they learned to handle their dogs. (The dog he uses in *Longstreet* is not a guide dog, however, but an →

actor dog playing a guide dog. He even has a stand-in!) "I had to learn more than just unfocusing my eyes," Jim says. "You have to have everything come in your ears. If that doesn't come across, you're lost."

Cecil Smith of the Los Angeles Times has dismissed *Longstreet*, with its blind insurance investigator, and *Ironside*, with its wheel-chair-bound detective, as "the gimmick-cop school of television." But Franciscus seeks another dimension in his role. "I want to play *Longstreet* as a guy coping, not self-pitying," he says. "I want to convince the audience that the blind are not truly handicapped."

Since Mr. Novak, Franciscus has not been content to concern himself entirely with acting. In partnership with Fred Brogger, he formed Omnibus Productions, which produced the TV specials "Heidi," "David Copperfield" and "Jane Eyre." In all three ventures, Jim's role was that of producer, rather than actor. In fact, according to a colleague, "Where most actors would try to find vehicles they could appear in, he did just the opposite. He would say, 'I'd never hire me for this part.' He limited himself strictly to the preliminary work, then let Brogger and Delbert Mann take over." After only a few months on *Longstreet*, Stirling Silliphant said, "He's more than an actor—he's a creative partner. My relationship with him is as an executive, not an actor."

But acting has been the first love of James Franciscus since, at 12, he appeared in a musical version of "Treasure Island" at the Fenderson School in West Newton, Mass. "Right then, I knew I wanted to be an actor," he says. He had moved East from Missouri (he was born in Clayton, Mo., Jan. 31, 1934) a year before, when his widowed mother remarried. The family was in the St. Louis Social Register.

When Jim's mother married New York stockbroker Francis LaFarge, of the literary LaFarges, "Jim's Midwestern background was projected into the Eastern cultural scene," according to an old friend.

At Taft School in Watertown, Conn., he starred in "Billy Budd" and "The Devil and Daniel Webster." His drama teacher there, Peter Candler, says, "The Devil was his favorite role. He would love to be the Devil, but he only gets pretty-boy parts." By the time Jim got to Yale, Candler was manager of the famed Cape Playhouse at Newton, Mass., where Franciscus spent his summers doing everything there was to do around the theater—building sets and painting scenery, as well as acting with such unknowns as Jane Fonda and Joanne Woodward. He also had a tiny studio where he wrote plays, and at Yale had a "little cubbyhole" which he used for the same purpose. ("He has a mania for seclusion," says Candler.) Some of his plays won prizes. One was written in Elizabethan verse, another concerned a teacher. "He can still recite them," says Candler.

Jim majored in English for his B.A. at Yale. "I wanted to be educated as well as be an actor," he says. Although he received some recognition for his writing, eventually he did not like the loneliness of the craft. "The old saying is that a writer sits alone on top of a mountain and looks down at the people in the valley," he says. "I want to be down in the valley."

In his junior year at Yale he starred in a musical version of "The Great Gatsby." Dick Cavett, who was in the same production, remembers him as "on the reserved side—mortified and terrified because he had to sing." But, Cavett adds, "The rest of us knew that the movie scouts in the audience would be looking at Franciscus, with that blond hair and all those teeth." They

were, too, and Jim got his first movie role in a thriller called "Four Boys and a Gun."

In 1960, Franciscus married Kitty Wellman. A friend says, "Kitty may be the best thing that ever happened to him." She has the ability to break through her husband's customary reserve, which, according to Silliphant, is not shyness but "a shield for a penetrating mind—he has total security." The Franciscus daughters, Jamie Allen and Kellie Allen, were both born on Dec. 4, one in 1961, the other in 1963 ("It must have been the same vacation," says Jim). The family lives on an acre in North Hollywood, in a ranchy, 30-year-old house with green shingles and shutters, surrounded by fruit trees.

The duality of Franciscus's personality shows up in his off-camera pursuits. He enjoys such solitary pastimes as reading (philosophy, psychology, biography) and listening to recordings of everything from rock to Bach. But he has also gone in for such flamboyant hobbies as flying a jet plane and parachute-jumping. He took up the latter because, he says, "I was always scared of heights." He plays tennis before packed stands in tournaments with Efrem Zimbalist Jr., Clint Eastwood and Charlton Heston. But last year he paid an unpublicized visit to the Lawrenceville School in New Jersey, where his old friend and mentor, Peter Candler, now heads the drama and cinema department. There Franciscus taught Candler's classes for three days.

When Candler and Franciscus write to each other, they begin their letters "Dear Snark." Lewis Carroll created the mythical snark—"a peculiar creature, that won't be caught in a conventional way." Perhaps the designation, insofar as James Franciscus is concerned, is not inappropriate. (END)



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